

health know-how

These statistics from the American College of Gastroenterology show the number of people who, at any given time in their lives, suffer from digestive ailments.

Heartburn	60 million
Irritable bowel syndrome	53 million
Ulcers	20 million

No more tummy troubles!

Doctors estimate that one in three of us are plagued with digestive problems every day. Luckily, treating stomach disorders is easier than ever before

Few people talk about it, yet more than half the U.S. population have stomach problems. You'd think doctors' offices would be jammed with patients seeking relief, but they're not. "Even severe heartburn sufferers tend to just live with their symptoms," says Seymour Katz, M.D., spokesperson for the American College of Gastroenterology. The good news is no one has to put up with stomach pain anymore—researchers have made huge strides in diagnosing and treating tummy troubles, and they've unearthed great home remedies, as well.

Another smart idea...
To prevent eye strain caused by reflective glare, computer users should avoid wearing white. If you must wear white, top it with a muted shade to cut glare.

HEARTBURN

As many as 60 million Americans get that all-too-familiar burning sensation one or more times each month. If stomach acid is



backing up into your esophagus, here's what to do:

Sleep on your left People who sleep on their left side have half as many flare-ups as right-sided sleepers. That's because sleeping on your left side makes the stomach slope in such a way as to allow food and acid to flow more quickly into the small intestine.

Steer clear of acid-producers People who have just two drinks with dinner have 10 times the stomach acid in their esophagus than teetotalers. Also worth avoiding: fatty foods, chocolate, caffeine and carbonated drinks—they all boost acid production and loosen the valve between the stomach and the esophagus.

Shed a few pounds "If you're overweight, getting trim is one of the best heartburn remedies," says Ray E. Clouse, M.D., gastroenterologist at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "Once people lose the extra weight around their bellies, they usually can eat the foods that used to cause trouble."

Get help If you're munching over-the-counter antacids more than twice a week, see your doctor. "You could be suffering from gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)," says Dr. Katz. This severe form of heartburn is caused by an all-out malfunctioning of the valve between the stomach and esophagus. GERD must be treated or it can lead to a permanent narrowing of the esophagus, hoarseness and a chronic cough.

ULCERS

At some point in their lives, at least 20 million Americans develop ulcers in their stomach or duodenum—the first part of the small intestine. Though most ulcers are fairly small, they can cause an astonishing amount of gnawing pain—often between meals or in the middle of the night. Here's the best plan of attack:

First, beat the bugs The top cause of ulcers isn't stress—it's *H. pylori* bacteria that love to burrow into the mucous lining of the intestinal tract. A simple breath test can now diagnose *H. pylori*—and a few weeks on antibiotics cures most sufferers.

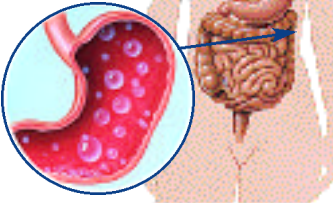
Say NO to NSAIDs Aspirin and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are the second most common ulcer trigger. "They damage the lining of the stomach and duodenum, and



slow the formation of the hormones needed for tissue repair,” says pharmacist Jerry Hickey, R.Ph., of the Natural Pharmacy Society. If you use painkillers regularly, ask your doctor about switching to less irritating acetaminophen or low-dose corticosteroids.

INTESTINAL GAS

First, the facts: it’s perfectly normal—although mortifying—to pass gas up to 20 times a day. But if a quick count



shows it happens to you more than that, here’s what to do:

Follow a low-air diet “Seventy percent of intestinal gas is actually swallowed air,” says Sheldon Zinberg, M.D., professor of gastroenterology at UCLA, Irvine. To avoid this, try eating more slowly, and give up common air-swallowing habits like sucking hard candies, chewing gum and sipping carbonated drinks.

Nix the milkshake Lactose intolerance—trouble breaking down milk sugars—is another cause of gas because undigested lactose is a prime source of food for gas-producing bacteria. If going cold turkey doesn’t appeal to you, try lactose-free milk products—or take Lactaid, an enzyme supplement that helps digest lactose.

The European solution

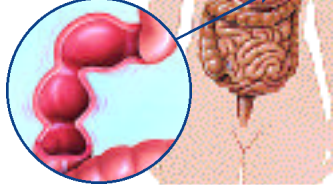
Peppermint breaks up gas in the intestines and soothes crampy spasms in the colon—but in the stomach, it can trigger heartburn. The European solution: enteric-coated peppermint cap-

Peppermint pills

sules. “They dissolve in the intestines, so there’s no risk of heartburn,” says pharmacist Jerry Hickey, R.Ph. Peppermint capsules are available in most health-food stores. Take as directed.

IRRITABLE BOWEL

No one is sure what causes irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)—a poorly functioning intestine that triggers bouts of diarrhea or constipation, c r a m p s ,



bloating, nausea and gas. What is known is that IBS doesn’t increase your risk of colon cancer or other intestinal trouble. To get your bowels back on track, start with the anti-gas remedies, then:

Soothe the stress One of the key triggers of IBS flare-ups is stress. Experiment with relaxation train-

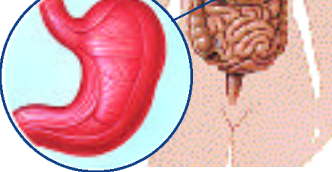
ing, meditation, exercise, extra sleep and delegating chores until you find the stress level your intestines can tolerate.

Keep a diary of symptoms “What triggers an IBS flare-up is different for each person,” says Dr. Jones. Keep track of what you eat—and how it affects your intestines—for at least two weeks, and you’ll soon know which foods to avoid.

Switch sweeteners Sorbitol, a sweetener used in many low-cal snacks, is a carbohydrate. “It passes straight to the large intestine, where it causes gas, bloating and diarrhea.

MOTILITY DISORDERS

When the muscles that wrap around the stomach and the intestines don’t work in sync, food doesn’t move along at its usual pace. The re-



sult is bloating, feelings of fullness early in a meal, indigestion and, sometimes, nausea and vomiting. “No one knows why, but almost 80 percent of motility-disorder patients are women,” says Robert S. Fisher, M.D., chief of gastroenterology at Philadelphia’s Temple University School of Medicine. For at-home relief, try these doctor-recommended remedies:

Mini-meal it One of the big motility-disorder hassles is that the stomach is too slow to empty. “So opt for five or six small, light meals each day instead of three large ones,” says Dr. Fisher.

Sweat to reduce bloating More than 80 percent of women can reduce bloating simply by working out for at least two hours each week. “The human body is designed to be active,” says pharmacist Jerry Hickey. “So daily exercise is one of the best ways to get your digestive tract functioning properly.”

Try teas that are tummy-friendly Ginger and slippery elm teas help food move through the digestive tract smoothly. If you don’t like herbal teas, try ginger or slippery elm supplements—you’ll find them at your local health-food store.

—BRENDA KEARNS

WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE ?

Intestinal troubles that come on suddenly—or are persistent—should be checked by a doctor. Here are some possible, treatable, causes:

IF YOU HAVE THESE SYMPTOMS...	IT COULD BE...
Diarrhea, rectal bleeding, cramping or sharp abdominal pain, occasional fever or an intestinal obstruction	Ulcerative colitis or Crohn’s disease—inflammatory conditions of the bowel
Cramping, abdominal pain that becomes constant and disabling, fever, nausea, tenderness on the left side of the abdomen	Diverticulitis—small sac-like swellings in the wall of the colon
Severe abdominal pain that radiates through to the back, or nausea and vomiting	Pancreatitis—an inflammation of the pancreas
Severe abdominal pain, sometimes jaundice — yellowing of the skin and eyes	Gallstones—clumps of cholesterol or pigment lodged in the gallbladder
Diarrhea, abdominal cramps, bloating, gas, fatigue and weight loss	Giardiasis—a parasitic infection of the intestines
Pain in the lower right abdomen, fever, nausea and vomiting	Appendicitis—an inflammation of the appendix